The Perversion of Virtue: Understanding Murder-Suicide
By Thomas Joiner, 2014 (Oxford University Press)
Reviewed by David N. Miller, Ph.D.

Thomas Joiner is one of the leading figures in contemporary suicidology. One of his previous books, *Why People Die By Suicide* (2005), has had a significant impact on the scientific study of suicide and our understanding of it. For example, a recent study (Spencer-Thomas & Jahn, 2012) cited the publication of that book as one of the seminal milestones in the history of suicide prevention in the U.S., and found Joiner’s interpersonal-psychological theory of suicide to be one of the “most impactful theories in the field of suicidology” (p. 78).

Joiner’s latest book, *The Perversion of Virtue: Understanding Murder-Suicide* (2014), can be viewed as a companion volume to that earlier work, and forms a trilogy of sorts with his *Myths about Suicide*, published in 2010. In this reviewer’s opinion, Joiner’s new book has the potential to be as influential in enhancing our understanding of murder-suicide as his earlier book has been on enhancing our understanding of suicide. Although free of jargon and clearly written for a general audience, *The Perversion of Virtue* should have wide appeal to a number of professional audiences as well, including suicidologists, psychologists, criminologists, and law enforcement, among others. Readers of Adam Lankford’s *The Myth of Martyrdom: What Really Drives Suicide Bombers, Rampage Shooters, and Other Self-Destructive Killers* (2013), another recent book about murder-suicide, will find Joiner’s book to be particularly interesting given their similar conclusions.

Joiner’s text makes a highly original contribution by proposing a comprehensive and coherent theory of murder-suicide that attempts to account for all – or nearly all – instances of this disturbing phenomenon. Joiner’s goal, as he states in the book’s preface, is “to develop and defend a specific perspective on murder-suicide, one that borrows on established knowledge and concepts, but one that reorganizes and extends them into a coherent and incrementally novel understanding of the horror that
is murder-suicide” (p. vii). He does not attempt to comprehensively review the scholarly literature on murder-suicide (although he does some of this, and does it well), but rather to persuade the reader “that the perspective developed in the book is viable, incremental beyond past work, and crucially, now ready to face off empirically with other perspectives” (p. vii).

In my view, Joiner succeeds admirably in each of these goals. Much of the book is devoted to carefully explicating his theory of murder-suicide, using what he refers to as a “bootstrapping” approach (i.e., beginning with facts, moving to conjecture, and then building to establish “a theory of what defines murder-suicide and the thought processes they underlie it” (p.vii)). As Joiner points out, existing theories that attempt to explain murder-suicide are scarce, and comprehensive theoretical models that might account for it are sorely needed. To Joiner’s credit, he not only provides a novel theory of murder-suicide but does so in a convincing manner, citing various forms of evidence that support his theory. Crucially, his theory is also one that is testable and falsifiable – aspects that distinguish it from other prominent theories that attempt to explain particular aspects of human behavior. As he makes clear, one of Joiner’s purposes in writing the book is to invite researchers to test his theory empirically and report their results.

In _The Perversion of Virtue_, Joiner proposes the theory that it is suicide – not murder – that is the initial and primary motivation among individuals who engage in murder-suicide, and that its perpetrators invariably pervert one of four interpersonal virtues: justice, mercy, duty, and/or heroic glory. The notion that the motive for murder-suicide involves a positive element such as virtue is initially surprising, but Joiner makes it clear that it is the _perversion_ of virtue that can lead to murder-suicide. He makes his arguments clearly and convincingly in a readable, conversational style that is highly engaging.

Although Joiner posits that murder-suicide always involves the perversion of at least one of the four virtues mentioned above, he finds that some forms of perverted virtue are more common than others, and that sometimes more than one virtue may be involved. For example, he theorizes that
perversions of justice and perversions of mercy are the two most common forms of perverted virtue in murder-suicide, and that the perversion of justice is more likely to be accompanied by a perversion of glory whereas the perversion of mercy is more likely to be accompanied by a perversion of duty. When he offers theoretical speculations, Joiner provides interesting and compelling evidence to support his ideas, does not claim support where none exists, and is very clear to communicate that his theory will need to be tested empirically to determine whether or not it is correct.

To summarize, *The Perversion of Virtue: Understanding Murder-Suicide* by Thomas Joiner is in my view a book that is likely to be highly influential. Designed for the general reader but one that will be of interest to professionals as well, this is a well-written and truly landmark text that deserves widespread attention; no other book I am aware of so clearly and comprehensively describes how to understand this disturbing phenomenon. Joiner proposes a new and original theory, supported by evidence, that suicide – not murder – is the initial and primary motivation for individuals who engage in murder-suicide, and that its perpetrators invariably pervert at least one of four major virtues. Informative, illuminating, and compelling, this book is essential reading for anyone wanting to better understand this tragic, horrifying, yet fascinating problem.